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ABSTRACT

Letters to the editor, one of the major ways citizens can respond to, and possibly even influence, public policy decisions, are good examples of public discourse. Those who take the time to write guest editorials or letters to the editor hope to go beyond self-expression to communication. They hope to influence the beliefs and attitudes, and even the actions, of others--to change minds. And yet, relatively few letters achieve this aim. Whatever their intent, the effect of many letters is to build not bridges but walls. Too often letter writers present a one-sided point of view and fail to empathize with those with whom they disagree. Or, writers are unwilling or unable to see beyond their own value and belief systems, making open debate of crucial issues both difficult and time-consuming. Another problem is writers' failure to adequately consider the assumptions and values of their audience. There are no simple solutions to problems as complex as these, especially since each letter is and ought to be unique. Nevertheless, there are three principles that, if followed, can lead to more effective communication: (1) consider audience and purpose carefully; (2) ground the argument, when possible, in assumptions or values shared by the audience; and (3) be specific, concrete, and--when relevant and appropriate--personal. (HOD)

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Public Discourse and Public Policy

A Case Study

Lisa Ede

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Public Discourse and Public Policy

A Case Study

Lisa Ede

I never followed local public policy controversies closely until my husband and I moved to Oregon, settling--permanently, we hope--in Corvallis. Before then we had lived in several large cities and one very small rural town. Nowhere did we feel the sense of connection--with the town, its institutions, and its citizens--that we have developed during our last three years in Oregon. Until we moved to Oregon we never subscribed to the local newspaper, preferring (with perhaps typical east coast snobbishness) an occasional New York Times to local efforts. Now I read my local newspaper daily. I particularly like to follow the letters to the editor, the modern equivalent of the town meeting where residents express their views on both major and minor issues of public concern. Like many of you, I read the letters to the editor for a variety of reasons: to educate myself about local issues, to learn about my community, and, at times, to amuse myself.

Lately I have found myself reading these letters from a different perspective and for a different reason. As a teacher of writing and a student of rhetoric--the art and science of effective communication, first formulated by Corax in 5th century BC and developed by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian--I have found myself examining these letters as examples of public discourse, as one of the major ways citizens of Oregon can respond to, and possibly even influence, public policy decisions. The results of this analysis have been discouraging to me, both as a citizen, one who has come to care deeply about what happens in my community, and as a teacher and scholar.

This research project was made possible by a 1983 summer research fellowship from the Oregon Committee for the Humanities, whose support the author gratefully acknowledges.

Consider the following pair of letters, catalyzed by a controversy which was the focus of frequent and heated debate in Corvallis from October 18, 1982, when the issue was first raised, to January 22, 1983, when the Corvallis Gazette-Times wearily called for a moratorium on all letters on this subject. You may well recognize exchanges such as this generated by other local issues. (I will describe the controversy to which these letters relate more fully later; I will just say now that it involved the efforts of a local group, the Committee for Quality School Textbooks, to influence the decisions of the Corvallis School Board concerning text selection and curriculum development. A major concern of this group was the influence of what is sometimes called secular humanism.) Here is the first letter:

> The Corvallis School Board is again being assailed by the high priests of ignorance and superstition. The country is currently going through a rebirth of popularity and interest in conservative philosophy and fundamentalist theology.
>
> Whether this is a permanent change in direction (I sincerely doubt that it is) or the backward swing of the pendulum of history (which would seem more likely), these merchants of fear and doom must be allowed to have their say and present their arguments.
>
> But their "true faith" and "missionary zeal" must not be allowed to slip into "witch hunts" and "holy crusades." These attacks upon the textbooks and the "humanistic values" that are presented to so many school boards around the country today have at last, after some initial successes, been addressed and refuted--quite handily, I might add--by an overwhelming number of scientists and educators.
>
> The elected school board members are to be congragulated for their patient stance in the face of these very organized and vocal groups.
>
> W.G.J.
> November 2, 1982[1]

The second letter was published the next day. (I have deleted several paragraphs of this letter.)

> It is evident from reading recent letters in the Gazette-Times that there is much confusion as to what "secular humanism" is and what effects, if any, it is having on the public school system.
>
> Many have questioned whether its antagonists even know what it is. The answer is, "yes we do."
>
> The New Webster's Dictionary gives a limited and purely humanistic definition. I am convinced that it is impossible for the non-Christian to really understand the meaning of humanism thus the perplexity among most educators. Consequently, they feel threatened and that their abilities and sincerity as teachers are under attack.
>
> For the Christian, humanism is anything which does not place God at the center of it. Therefore, the public school system is humanistic in nature. This negative philosophy is the basis of all public education today--a philosophy which ignores God and exalts man. This has had a devastating effect on our children and on the quality of education they are receiving.
>
> . . . .One wonders about the implications of this philosophy [secular humanism] on moral behavior. I believe the evidence is already in. Young people are discontented and apathetic. Suicide, drug addiction and alcoholism are on the rise, and more children are giving birth to children outside of marriage than anytime in our history. Even the educators would agree that literacy is on the decline.
>
> What is their solution to the problem? More tax dollars, of course! I say the whole system is sick unto death and in bad need of a 'heart' transplant . . . .
>
> S.R.
> November 3, 1982

There are a number of ways we might approach these letters. We could comment on the obvious political differences they exhibit, and the way those differences are reflected in the writers' style. We could, if we

wished, go through these letters hunting for logical fallacies--a hasty generalization here, a post hoc ergo propter hoc there. We could note the strong sense of alarm, of almost apocalyptic anxiety, these writers evidence, the sense that not just Corvallis, Oregon but the United States at large is at a critical turning point, one which will influence its fate for generations.

What I find most striking, however, is the complete nonintersection of these writers' assumptions and views. Each writer is clearly thinking and writing in the context of an entirely different value and belief system. These systems are so strong--their boundaries are so tightly and rigidly drawn--that the writers hold their beliefs with from near certainty (in the case of W.G.J., who notes confidently that conservative attacks on textbooks have been "addressed and refuted--quite handily, I might add--by an overwhelming number of scientists and educators") to absolute conviction (in the case of S.R., whose religious values preclude uncertainty in issues relating to God and religion). The first letter both privileges and appeals to readers' faith in science, technology, and social institutions; the second, to readers' belief in God and to Christian--more accurately, perhaps, to fundamentalist Christian--values. Neither writer is willing to concede that there is anything to argue about, any shared mutual concern to explore, any issue to analyze, much less any place to compromise.

In a sense, then, the second letter writer is at least partially correct when she states that she is "convinced that it is impossible for the non-Christian to really understand the meaning of humanism." Her own sense of the gulf between her views and those of more liberal readers led her,

in the concluding paragraph of her letter, to abandon all hopes of a public resolution of this controversy. Instead, she urged Susan Simonson, the chairperson of the Committee for Quality School Textbooks, to work for the establishment of a private Christian school, one reflecting the values of the Committee: "Susan Simonson and other concerned parents, stop trying to salvage something good from today's educational system. You are wasting your time. Why not direct your energies and resources into beginning a really fine Christian academy here--one that is established on the word of God?"

These two writers have reached an impasse; they are, for all practical purposes, unable to communicate with those whose views differ substantially from their own because they are, in these letters at least, unwilling or unable to look beyond their own belief and value systems. It is possible, of course, that if these writers were present to explain their motives they might well point out that they never intended to attempt to influence "the other side." "Everyone knows they're limited and prejudiced in their views," they might say. "I just wanted to express my own ideas and alert others who share them to the danger." Such motives are perfectly understandable, although letters to the editor written for these reasons often have the unanticipated effect not only of increasing the adherence of those in agreement, but also of further alienating, and sometimes even outraging, those whose beliefs differ from their own--and thus further polarizing the community.

More often, I suspect, those who take the time to write letters to the editor or guest editorials hope to go beyond self-expression to communication. They hope to influence the beliefs and attitudes, and

possibly even the actions, of others--to change minds. And yet, as I followed the controversy over the Committee for Quality School Textbooks, I was struck by how relatively few letters (from both sides of the debate) had much chance of achieving this aim. Whatever their intent, the effect of many of these letters was to build not bridges but walls.

As I noted earlier, this realization discouraged me. As a citizen, I wondered if Americans have become so splintered, so politicized, that we are simply no longer able to argue publicly about issues involving fundamental political, social, and religious values. As a teacher of writing, I had other questions and concerns. I wondered why formal instruction in argumentation, which is frequently taught in high school and often in college, seemed to have had so little effect on these letter writers. In the classical period, rhetoric strongly emphasized communication involving public issues and problems. Has modern rhetorical instruction abdicated its responsibility in this area? Do contemporary rhetorical theorists have useful advice to offer those who wish to engage in discussions of public policy, discussions which often occur in the letters to the editor columns of local newspapers?

I believe that contemporary rhetoricians--scholars such as Chaim Perelman, Stephen Toulmin, Wayne Booth, and Henry Johnstone, Jr.--do indeed have much to say to those of us who care about what goes on in our communities and who wish to share our views with others. I would like to present some of these ideas by applying them via a case study--an analysis of the letters written during the controversy over the Committee for Quality School Textbooks in Corvallis. I will first consider examples of negative strategies--

strategies which violate basic standards of fair-play in argument or which seem likely to close off, rather than to increase communication--and then move on to letters which seem to reflect more positive strategies. I also hope to offer some practical, concrete advice to those of you who are interested in public policy issues and would like to write both effective and ethical letters to the editor.

Before looking at specific letters, however, I would like to give you a little more information about the local controversy which catalyzed these letters. As I stated earlier, this controversy became a public issue in Corvallis on October 18th, 1982. On that day, Susan Simonson, a resident of Corvallis, appeared before an unusually crowded Corvallis School Board meeting, urging the Board to adopt a resolution banning the teaching of what she called "secular humanism" in the schools. Simonson claimed to be speaking not just for herself, but as the chairman of a newly formed Committee for Quality School Textbooks. As part of her statement, Simonson presented critiques of current textbooks, some of which were written by local citizens and others by such nationally recognized conservative critics as Mel Gabler of Longview, Texas.

According to the Corvallis Gazette-Times, which reported on her presentation in the next day's paper, Simonson's remarks sparked a lively discussion at the meeting. They also ignited an even fiercer debate in the Gazette-Times' letters to the editor column. During the next four months, the Gazette-Times published at least 85 letters on the subject--I think I caught them all, but one or two could have slipped by--including

four letters and one guest editorial by Simonson herself. The Gazette-Times also published two editorials and one editorial cartoon on the Committee's goals and methods. Another guest editorial, this time by a member of the School Board, also appeared. On January 22, 1983, the Gazette-Times called for a moratorium, noting that "arguments for and against the committee and its aims have been adequately presented in the many letters published to date" ("Weekend Wrap Up, p. 4). Although the moratorium did stop the flow of letters, the Committee for Quality School Textbooks has remained a source of controversy. A number of letters written in support of or opposition to individuals running for the School Board the following March, for instance, referred to the Committee. In her capacity as chairman of the Committee, Simonson has also published two additional letters, one written during the March election and one as recently as August 27, 1983. Members of the Committee have also continued to attend School Board meetings in the hope of encouraging basic changes in the school district's curricula and procedures.

As you perhaps have already realized, although the controversy over the Committee for Quality School Textbooks is a response to local issues and tensions--the sense of isolation that conservatives might feel in a university town like Corvallis, for instance--it also reflects national concerns and disagreements. I am not aware of the precise nature of the connection between the Committee for Quality School Textbooks and national conservative organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council or the ProFamily Forum.[2] Simonson's proposals and letters, as well as

many of the letters written in support of the Committee's efforts, clearly reflect, however, a conservative agenda. Many individuals writing in support of the Committee were dismayed by what they perceived to be the liberal bend of public education in Corvallis. Some felt that teachers failed adequately to emphasize traditional Christian and American values. Others feared that educational practices such as values clarification undermined parents' efforts to teach their children absolute moral, religious, and social values. Criticisms of current educational policy ranged from the very specific (outrage over the use of a particular novel or textbook) the the very general (the charge that secular humanism is "a world wide system that is subtly capturing the minds of our young people"). Whatever their complaint, many of these letter-writers evidenced a general anxiety that contemporary Americans are "falling away" from God, Christianity, and traditional American values.

These concerns and charges elicited a broad range of responses, many of which, not surprisingly, reflected liberal assumptions and values. Many letter writers argued that Simonson and the Committee fail sufficiently to recognize the complexity of modern life--that the Committee has an unrealistic, overly rigid view of America, one which it is trying to impose on a society of great religious, social, and racial diversity. Some denied that schools teach "secular humanism"; others argued that this term is so vague as to be meaningless. Many letter-writers charged the Committee with trying to impose censorship, while others feared that the Committee's policies, if enacted, would result in a loss of separation of church and state. A number

of letter writers were disturbed by the Committee's methods (a subject I will discuss in a moment). And just as many letter writers supporting the Committee were concerned about life in contemporary America, so too were many of those opposed to the Committee. Their fears, however, were different: these writers worried that the Committee for Quality School Textbooks is part of a larger conservative movement, one which is attempting to effect major--and, they believe, highly detrimental--political and social changes in America.

Now that you have a more detailed sense of the origins of this controversy and of the basic issues it raised, I would like to look at specific letters. One qualifying point needs to be made first, however: in the following I will be concerned not with the general tactics of the Committee in its dealings with the Corvallis School Board--some of which, at least, seem questionable--but with the letters to the editor and guest editorials engendered by the controversy it aroused. This is not to say that the Committee's tactics are irrelevant On the contrary, the Committee's original refusal to publish the names of its members or to follow the School Board's already established procedures, as well as its occasional preference for publicity-seeking methods (I am thinking here of Susan Simonson's statement in the October 19th Gazette-Times that she proposed her initial anti-humanism resolution "not so much to get [it] approved, as . . . to focus attention on the district's curriculum and on board members who allegedly support humanism," p. 2), all served to heighten tensions and polarize the community.[3] As a result, they directly influenced the tenor of the

subsequent debate in the Gazette-Times' letters to the editor column.

This debate was, as I have indicated, often quite heated--a fact that may be related both to the fundamental beliefs and values at stake and to the Committee for Quality School Textbook's methods. This climate may partially account for what is perhaps the most striking characteristic of many, though fortunately not all, of the letters to the editor on this issue--their one-sidedness. This one-sidedness is expressed in a number of related ways. Of all the letters written in support of or opposition to the Committee, for instance, only five or six were willing to grant that any issue raised by the other side merited serious public attention. Perhaps even more importantly, only a handful of writers attempted to empathize with those with whom they disagreed--to see the issue from their perspective, to understand their concerns and fears. And only a few writers tried to establish points of agreement--shared values, priorities, or goals, for instance--that might help those involved reach some acceptable compromise.

Such a failure is critical, for unless participants in an argument are willing seriously to consider the views of others--and this involves attempting to understand not only their ideas or proposals but the reasons why they hold them--real communication simply cannot occur. What does occur is, in some cases, little more than propogandizing. Such propogandizing may help unify those who already agree with one or another of the competing views, but it has the negative consequence not only of closing off reasoned discussion on important issues, but of further polarizing the community as well.

The most general problem I saw, then--one which clearly reduced the effectiveness of many well-intentioned letters--involves writers' unwillingness or inability to see beyond their own value and belief systems. Although this problem in varying degrees characterized a broad range of letters from both sides of the debate, it was particularly evident among those writers who supported the Committee for Quality School Textbooks. As their letters made clear, many of these writers adhered to such absolute religious, and sometimes also political, beliefs and values that their views were simply not subject to change--to critical self-esamination. Indeed, such self-examination is precisely what many of those who supported the Committee wished to discourage in the education of their children. Such an attitude presents a serious impediment to discussions of public policy, for openness--the willingness to have even your most basic ideas changed--is essential if genuine, as well as ethical, argumentation is to occur.

A number of those who wrote most strenuously in support of the Committee for Quality School Textbooks relied on such fallacies as hasty generalizations, begging the question, non sequiturs, and post hoc ergo propter hoc. (Again, I want to emphasize that these fallacies occurred in letters written by others as well. The overall pattern, however, is clear: I found many more examples of fallacies such as these in letters written in support of the Committee.) The following excerpts represent typical instances of these fallacies:

Each time someone takes a stand for high-quality education, every American Civil Liberties Union-type liberal comes warping on the eastern wind, proclaiming himself to be a moderate and crying "radical religious right" and censorship.

M.M.C.
December 11, 1982

In short, the board can stop using our children as guinea pigs in the educational experiments of the day and return to a no-nonsense education in basic, fundamental skills and questions.

Susan Simonson
"As I See It"
(guest editorial)
December 20, 1982

We've already been snookered by the philosophy that parents don't know what's best for their children; we should leave their training to the "experts."

Now we are expected to sit back and let anyone who happens to have a teaching certificate unrestrainedly determine what our children read, do, and think for one-third of their waking hours, five days a week.

B.C.
December 29, 1982

As the popularity of humanism rose, crime and immorality rose. The results are vandalism, drunkenness, adultery, widespread disease (especially among homosexuals), broken homes, and overflowing jails.

S.B.
November 23, 1982.

When we see headlines proclaiming, "Prisons for women overcrowded," we need not ask what they are crowded with. We know that they are full of the products of our public education system.

F.C.
January 20, 1983

> This [the accomplishments of our forefathers] is in radical contrast to the humanist presupposition that man is god and, therefore, chooses to deem what is valuable and moral. The product of the latter philosophy has been epidemic venereal disease, abortion, divorce, the breakdown of the nuclear family, drug abuse, and a soaring crime rate.
>
> L.B.
> December 28, 1982

Traditional argumentation textbooks often ascribe fallacies such as these to insufficient mastery of formal logic. Thus one recent text describes begging the question as "asserting in the premises what is asserted in the conclusion."[4] In reading the letters generated by this local controversy, however, I was struck by other potential factors. One of these involves the decided preference for arguing at very high levels of generalization evidenced by a number of writers, but particularly by those writing in support of the Committee for Quality School Textbooks. Given the necessary brevity of letters to the editor, writers simply cannot support or clarify highly general statements--such as those cited above or this typical charge, that "Secular humanism is a philosophy. It is espoused mainly by theists, agnostics, and atheists. It is a political belief in the value of a socialist one-world government as a cure all" (M.S., December 4, 1982)--and thus inevitably slip into fallacious reasoning. I have already noted a second important factor, the reluctance of some individuals critically to examine their own values and beliefs. When taken to an extreme, such an attitude makes public argument almost impossible, as the following statement by one writer strikingly demonstrates: "Whether my view is correct makes little difference in the end, as God is the judge" (M.C., December 4, 1982).

Other attitudes and practices can also significantly impede discussions of public policy, making open debate of crucial issues both difficult and time-consuming. One strategy which surfaced during the controversy over the Committee for Quality School Textbooks in Corvallis--and which clearly violated many readers' sense of fair play--was the practice of presenting potentially titillating or disturbing quotations from novels or textbooks out of context. Of four letters published by Susan Simonson during this period (October 18 to January 22), for instance, two involved the presentation of such material. I have included the second letter here because it stimulated one largest number of responses.

> It wasn't too long ago that all the books assigned in an English class contained the common virtues--decency, modesty, selflessness, integrity, pride, courage, self-reliance, reverence and so on.
>
> What do many of them contain today? Let's take a look at "Trask," a book recently assigned for an entire 11th grade English class to read in a local Corvallis high school.
>
> Page 178: "Maybe you sleep tonight like a woman, with a hole between your legs. Maybe you sleep with your mouth full of your own flesh . . . . This is my penis . . . You will cut it off, maybe? You will make me eat it, maybe?"
>
> If you believe a child becomes what he learns, you will join me in being thankful that there is at least a minority of Corvallis School Board members with enough common sense and traditional values to be opposed to textbooks containing quotations like the one above.
>
> Susan Simonson
> December 3, 1982

This single letter catalyzed seven direct responses, and many other less clearly focused letters also commented on the inappropriateness of what one writer called Simonson's "out-of-context sexy quotations" (G.B.C., December 18, 1982). A number of writers provided a fuller context for the quotation, one noting that "Page 178 in my book does not contain the quotation cited by Simonson. In fact, the material she chose to quote is scattered through a number of pages" (K.T.S., December 11, 1982). Several others commented angrily that "the newspaper is a highly inappropriate place to broadcast her out-of-context quotes. Eleventh graders, I believe, can handle this material, but children of all ages have access to the newspaper" (M.L., December 10, 1982). The response of readers to the presentation of out-of-context excerpts is heartening, for such a practice clearly violates basic ethical conventions in argument. The entire discussion did little to clarify the more general issues being debated, however--such as the appropriateness of the school district's curriculum or of values education--and thus may finally have hindered, rather than encouraged, public discussion of these important larger issues.

Even those who are willing to engage in a genuine and open discussion and who recognize that debates over local issues can most fruitfully be carried out by focusing on relatively specific, rather than highly general, facts and problems may still have difficulty in writing effective arguments. One common cause for this can be traced to the failure adequately to consider the assumptions and values of their audience--in this case the broad readership that even a local newspaper like the Gazette-Times comprises. The following letter is an example of this problem. I chose this letter not because it

is a particularly bad example, but because most of the letter is, in my view, both effective and ethical. In her closing paragraphs, however, this writer jeopardizes her earlier accomplishment.

> I wonder why Susan Simonson chose a letter to the editor, published November 8, as her way to protest material she thought unacceptable for high-school classroom use.
>
> Surely she knows that the place to begin such a protest is with the teacher. If she had called the teacher, as I did, she could have learned that the book she objected to is a collection of magazine articles. Some of the articles have been suggested resource reading for this family life class. The article containing the quote has never been on this list.
>
> Family Life is not a required course. It is a course that students can choose to take. None of Simonson's children have taken this course.
>
> I inspected the book. The quotation is an article from "The Futurist" describing changing patterns of American family life. The writing is matter-of-fact, with supporting statistics. The one paragraph on changing attitudes toward sex (most of which was quoted) is an attempt to say that whereas in the past sex was thought to be sinful, sex is now seen as a normal positive aspect of human behavior--and the physically and mentally handicapped are human beings too. The paragraph was ineptly written and should have received the attention of a good editor.
>
> It angers me that a highly-regarded teacher has been unfairly attacked in the public press. I hope it will not happen again Continued use of such destructive tactics will undermine teacher morale and reduce the quality of education in our schools.
>
> I believe Simonson's letter is part of the continuing effort by the radical religious right to change the philosophical balance on the Corvallis School Board. Last March this group was able to throw up a smoke screen of "fiscal responsibility" behind which it helped engineer the election of two radical-right School Board members.
>
> If we are going to keep a moderate balance on our School Board, we must educate ourselves as to the aims of the radical religious right, recognize the tactics it uses, and elect two moderate school board members this spring.

19

B.B.
November 16, 1982

In this letter, the writer raises an important question concerning the methods of Simonson and the Committee. She does all readers a service by clarifying the source and context of the quotation, and she is objective enough to concede that even when viewed in its proper context the paragraph, which argues for the rights of the handicapped to experience sexual pleasure, is poorly written.

At this point, however, the writer makes several large generalizations--generalizations which simply cannot be supported in even a relatively long letter to the editor, as this is--and uses fairly inflammatory language to do so.[5] The term "radical religious right" is, of course, one that is currently used by many liberals, sometimes precisely and sometimes not, to describe various manifestations of a broad conservative political and religious movement in America. If this writer were addressing only readers who shared her viewpoint, her use of this term might function effectively as a "code word," one which would allow her to express a complex of shared assumptions and beliefs succinctly and even powerfully. But she was addressing a broad readership, many of whom took strong exception both to her charge and to her language. Some readers believed that she was uncritically lumping all fundamentalist Christians together as members of "the radical religious right"; others felt that she was trying to squelch all views but her own.

I don't know the author of this letter, but I doubt that she intended to do either of these things. The seriousness of her letter, and the obvious care she took in researching and writing it, indicate that she wished to help clarify the discussion. Most of her letter does contribute effectively

to readers' understanding of this issue, but in the last paragraphs the writer weakens her argument unnecessarily. Had she more carefully considered the assumptions and values of all of her audience, not just those already in agreement with her, she could have brought her argument to a much more effective conclusion. As it is, she risked inflaming or confusing at least some of those readers whom, I presume, she most wished to persuade--those who were neither already strongly identified with or actively opposed to the Committee for Quality School Textbooks--the undecided, often uninformed, middle.

The following letter exemplifies another strategy which might be effective for a restricted audience of readers, but which risks unnecessarily angering or polarizing other members of the community. This letter was written in response to the repeated presentation of out-of-context excerpts by the Committee for Quality School Textbooks, as described earlier.

> In recent letters we have been treated to several titillating quotes found in high school reading material. We would like to jump on the bandwagon and share a few passages from one old and popular book to which nearly every child has access:
>
> 1. "Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me" (Exodus 4:25).
>
> 2. "And they made their father drink wine that night also: and the younger arose and lay with him; and he perceived not when she lay down nor when she arose" (Genesis 19:35).
>
> 3. "And ye shall eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters shall ye eat" (Leviticus 26:29).

4. ". . .so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning" (Judges 19:25).

5. "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25).

6. "And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent" (Genesis 9:21).

7. ". . .thy love is better than wine" (Song of Solomon 1:2).

8. "The sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and spoiled the city, because they had defiled their sister" (Genesis 34:27).

9. ". . .he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts" (Song of Solomon 1:13).

10. "I called for my lovers, but they deceived me" (Lamentations 1:19).

11. "They ravished the women in Zion, and the maids in the cities of Judah" (Lamentations 5:11).

We hope readers share our sense of righteous indignation, and will write their congressman demanding that something be done!

J.J.I.
December 30, 1982

These authors made their point, but they also catalyzed several angry responses, including one which charged that "the verses in this letter show the devil's evil work" (S.A.M., January 4, 1983). That they could have avoided so inflaming these readers is clear from the following excerpt from another letter, one responding to Susan Simonson's out-of-context quotation from Trask. As you will see, this author makes a

similar, but much more broadly effective, argument:

> Since Susan Simonson thinks children become what they learn, I do not want her criteria used for my children't education. Her quotes indicate she has become a person who concentrates on paragraphs which are minor in relation to the entire book. If Simonson would like, I will be happy to concentrate on Biblical quotes which discuss rape, lovemaking, incest, or sexual brutality. However, it will take me a while, as I have concentrated on the total book.
>
> J.S.
> December 8, 1982

I have by no means catalogued all the negative strategies that appeared in the letters to the editor or guest editorials generated by this local controversy. As you might expect, for example, a few regrettable instances of ad hominem attacks occurred. But the general outline is, I hope, clear. A number of preconditions are necessary before genuine public discussion--as opposed to propogandizing--can occur. Individuals must, to put it most simply, have an open mind. Although they of course have their own beliefs and values, their own point to make, they must be willing at least to consider the views of others. Ideally, this consideration will go beyond intellectual analysis and will involve a genuine attempt to empathize with those whose views differ from their own--to understand the concerns and fears which motivate their thinking. Those who wish to argue about important local and national issues--to persuade others--must also themselves be open to argument. They must, again to speak most simply, be willing to change their own minds, to respond thoughtfully and attentively to the questions and comments of others. And they must agree to follow certain conventions regarding the presentation and attribution of materials.

But these are just preconditions. Even with the best of intentions and after serious consideration of the issues, writers can still fail effectively to express their ideas--to persuade. In the remainder of the time left to me, I would like to offer some concrete advice to those of you who wish to engage in discussions of public issues. We will also look at a number of letters to the editor which, in my view, are particularly good examples of both effective and ethical arguments.

It might help, however, to spend a moment considering the constraints inherent in the form of the letter to the editor and, to a lesser degree, the guest editorial. Both are obvious, and yet, if the letters generated by the controversy over the Committee for Quality School Textbooks are typical, many writers could benefit from greater attention to them. These two constraints are: 1) that letters published in newspapers--even in relatively small local newspapers, like the Gazette-Times--reach a broad and diverse readership; and 2) that these letters must be relatively brief.

What does this mean for individuals who want to express their views on important local or national issues? It means that they must make a number of interrelated rhetorical choices, some of which are quite sophisticated. It is difficult to write an effective letter to the editor, for instance, unless you have some sense of the particular audience you wish to influence. And yet you can never forget that, potentially at least, everyone who subscribes to your paper may read your letter. And how do you say something significant--something that will cause people to rethink their ideas, and possibly even change their minds--when you are limited to a column or so

of newsprint?

There are no simple solutions to problems as complex as these, especially since each letter is and ought to be unique. But I can present three principles which I believe can help you make effective choices. These are: 1) consider your audience and your purpose carefully; 2) ground your argument, when possible, in assumptions or values shared by your audience; and 3) be specific, concrete and, when relevant and appropriate, personal.

One of the most common stylistic weaknesses of the letters to the editor that I read was that they tried to do too much; many were a hodge podge, with some ideas fully developed and supported and others not just less developed but competing with--and thus lessening the effectiveness of--the writer's major points. Writers need to recognize that their letters can achieve a very limited number of goals--and sometimes just one.

Consider the various purposes which a letter to the editor or guest editorial might fulfill. One such purpose involves either clarifying facts or discussing a single issue which you feel has been inadequately presented. Many of the letters which provided the context or source for quotations accomplished this goal, as did Zel Brook's informative guest editorial, which wisely limited itself to reviewing "the process for addressing the School Board, the district's guidelines for textbooks and curriculum, and the requirements for graduation" ("As I See It," December 27, 1983). Another example is the following letter, which responds to a specific point made by an earlier writer:

> A Committee for a Representative School Board was formed last February for the purpose of seeking out qualified people to run for the Corvallis School Board. At that time the board was largely composed

> of persons with teaching backgrounds. None of its members had engineering, finance or business experience.
>
> To correct this imbalance, the committee backed and elected Tom Pederson of the accounting firm of Pederson and Powell because his accounting skills and expertise were needed on the board. The Committee for a Representative School Board is made up largely of former School Board directors, together with local business and professional persons. Its members are listed here: Leo Beach, Harold Benson, Bill Benson, Bert Christensen, Emelyn Christensen, Irene Cheldelin, Virgil Freed, Frances Gallagher, Lynn Gallagher, Willard Hamlin, Gene Hanson, Jim Oldfield, Wally Pease, Larry Plum, Milosh Popovich, Alden Toevs, and Stan Williamson.
>
> In a Nov. 16 letter to the Gazette-Times, Barbara Boucot claims this committee is part of the continuing effort of the radical religious right to change the philosophical balance on the Corvallis School Board. She also claims this group was able last March to throw up a smoke screen of "fiscal responsibility" behind which it helped engineer the election of Tom Pederson.
>
> To charge that the committee persons named above are part of the "radical religious right" is not only ludicrous, but a gross distortion of the facts.
>
> B.E.C.
> November 23, 1982

Some readers may still feel that this letter does not entirely set the record straight, while others may be convinced of its claim. In providing detailed information for readers, the writer performs a valuable service for all by encouraging them to make up their own minds on this issue.

Other writers may wish not to answer a particular charge or clarify a precise point but to attempt to redirect the focus of a controversy--to get readers to see the issues in a new light, or to discover new issues not yet discussed. I'm sure that many readers of the Gazette-Times nodded their

heads in agreement with this writer, for instance, who noted that "'Humanist' and 'Christian' are labels being tossed around too much lately. Whatever happened to the label that makes us all one--human beings? . . . . We are weary of the continual harangues by radicals from both sides" (D.L.N-R, November 10, 1982). And the following brief letter, which also attempts to refocus the controversy over the Committee for Quality School Textbooks, is a good example of the fact that a letter does not have to be lengthy to be effective.

> I would not fault any parent or group of parents for wanting to protect their children from an idea they feel is threatening.
>
> But I could wish that some of that truly righteous indignation and caring was directed toward the television programming that threatens all our children, or toward the possibility of nuclear war, which threatens all the world's children.
>
> M.M.
> October 23, 1982

Letters such as these may not actually succeed in deflating or redirecting controversies as virulent as that which we have been discussing, but they can help readers to see the controversy from a different--and often quite fruitful--perspective.

Another particularly useful purpose, one which particularly respects the intelligence of readers, is to provide sources of information, such as the titles of books or articles, about the subject under debate. Writers who refrain from arguing for a particular position but instead urge members of the community to become more aware of the issues or more involved in the

decision-making process also fulfill a vital purpose. Although the writer of the following letter does conclude by indicating his support for a particular viewpoint, most of his letter effectively attempts both to establish shared goals and to encourage more citizens to become involved with education.

> The numerous letters to the editor and views expressed by persons interviewed locally on the radio about the quality and nature of educational policies in the Corvallis School District seem to be polarizing our community.
>
> I hope that as we continue the process of examination that we will all remember, regardless of individual beliefs, that the most valuable and precious asset which our community, state and nation possesses is the minds of our young people.
>
> I believe it was Abraham Lincoln who said "The philosophy of our educational system today becomes the philosophy of our government tomorrow."
>
> The fact that we have this controversy in the community suggests that valid reasons for concern do exist. Let's work together as responsible citizens to insure that our teachers, most of whom are dedicated and well-qualified, will be able to continue to enjoy their calling. If the majority in the community feel changes should be made, and the facts support this need, then we should be able to accomplish this in a constructive manner.
>
> It is with this feeling that I have chosen to support and work with the Committee for Quality Textbooks. The Corvallis School Board and district administrators can not do it all, and we should not just assume that because we live in America everything is all right at school.
>
> If you, the reader, have concerns, get involved. If you believe changes are needed which will benefit our young people, it is wrong to do nothing.
>
> W.E.S.
> December 21, 1982

Finally, writers may choose simply to make a strong personal statement about their feelings on a particular subject. This can be a difficult task, for the lack of solid supporting evidence can weaken a writer's position. Often, a literary approach functions best in this situation, as in the following brief example:

> Have you noticed, when traveling at night, how the narrow beam of a flashlight distorts the size and shape of the stones in a path?
>
> Given a choice, I would rather travel that path in the daytime so that I can see the stones in their proper perspective and so that I might view what lies beside the path.
>
> I want to express my appreciation to the Corvallis teachers who have provided the necessary light, so that my children have traveled the path in sunlight.
>
> J.C.R.
> December 6, 1982

This writer does not present the kind of argument that would, for instance, convince those strongly opposed to his view. But he does make a strong personal statement, one which might have a powerful impact on many other readers.

As this last example indicates, clarifying your purpose is not enough; you also need to consider the audience you most want to influence--always remembering, of course, that your letter or editorial will be read by a broad readership, and thus considering its potential impact on these readers as well. The author of the above letter knew, I'm sure, that he would hardly convert a staunch supporter of the Committee for Quality School Textbooks; he did not, on the other hand, needlessly inflame these or other persons, as

did the authors of the letter which presented excerpts from the Bible out of context. A number of letter writers, however, evidently were so angered by the actions of a specific group--the School Board, say, or the Committee for Quality School Textbooks--that they forgot that they were not writing to those individuals but to the public at large. Their letters suffered as a result.

It is not easy to write an effective letter which clearly states your position and the reasons for it when you are addressing those who already agree with you. But it is very difficult indeed to attempt to persuade those whose beliefs and values differ markedly from your own. One of the most effective ways to attempt to persuade such an audience is to ground your argument, when possible, in assumptions or values which you share with your readers. The following letter is a most effective example of this strategy:

> I am glad to see that our community is so interested in the quality of the education of students in the Corvallis School District. Personally, I would like to commend the School Board for a job well done.
>
> I have been attending Pacific Lutheran University since graduating from Crescent Valley in 1981 and have found my high school education quite adequate for the academic challenges I have faced. College definitely is not easy, but Crescent Valley was an excellent source of preparation for university life.
>
> I would also like to note that situation ethics and values clarification should not necessarily be condemned by the Committee for Quality School Textbooks. Depending on the context in which these two educational tools are used, they can be very useful and are really quite harmless in helping the concerned citizen establish his or her priorities.

> I go to a university that proudly claims its students receive a "quality education in a Christian context;" yet in several of my classes, situation ethics have been used. All of the students in my "Leadership for Outdoor Ministries" class used values clarification.
>
> Contrary to Susan Simonson's beliefs, values clarification does not demand that you reject the values of your parents, church or anyone else. Rather, values clarification teaches you to think through your own values and standards and to decide what demands priority in your life.
>
> I believe this is what God wants us to do. I believe God does not want us to have certain values because our parents, pastor or even the Bible say they are right. God wants us to believe in him, and in his ways, because we know what is right.
>
> I once heard a pastor say, "we don't need to park our brains outside the church before we enter." To that I say "Amen!"
>
> J.W.
> January 5, 1983

Unlike many writers, who charged Simonson and the Committee with being religious "zealots," this writer, a student at Pacific Lutheran University, presents herself as a Christian, one who thus at least partly shares the religious values of those who support the Committee. Her affirmation that "God does not want us to have certain values because our parents, pastor, or even the Bible says they are right. God wants us to believe in him, and in his ways, because we know what is right" may not convince members of the Committee--but they cannot so easily discount her views either. And her explanation of the importance of values education in her own "Leadership for Outdoor Ministries" class represents a potent argument in favor of this method, not just for

the Committee and its supporters, but for a large part of the community as well, many of whom either share or respect her religious values.

Another strength of this letter is its specificity and the writer's obvious personal involvement with her subject. To use a term favored by rhetoricians, this young woman effectively uses language to create a strong and convincing sense of ethos--she persuades as much by the image of herself that she creates in her letter as by her specific arguments. Many writers, either unwilling to think for themselves or awed by the fact that their words will appear in print, seem to favor grand pronouncements and large, often unsupported generalizations. And yet, perhaps because we are people ourselves, and thus are finally at least as interested in other people as in ideas--why else do so many of us read the letters to the editor daily, for instance, yet sometimes skip the evening's editorial--we are often most moved and persuaded by arguments which seem genuinely to reflect one person's thoughts and experience. It is easy to discredit or ignore large generalizations on the importance of prayer in the schools or of separation of church and state. But personal statements--such as that by one writer who noted that she "feel(s) a sense of loss when Frosty the Snowman replaces our beautiful Christmas music at the School's winter program, but I do understand why" (S.N., November 20, 1982)--can often make readers pause and think.

I was often struck while reading these letters by the opportunities lost to supporters of the Committee for Quality School Textbooks who tended, as I noted earlier, to prefer abstract, highly generalized arguments.[6] Because of this preference, few attempted to present their ideas in such a

way that readers could feel their problems, could understand the origin and nature of their concerns. One exception to this is the following question posed by Susan Simonson in a letter to the editor published the day before the Gazette-Times called for a moratorium on all letters on this controversy. "What about the families that have taught their children there are absolute moral standards? When the child is told at school there are no absolutes, and then is told at home that there are absolutes, might this not result in a generation gap?" (January 21, 1983). Although some readers might not accept the major assumptions underlying this question, that schools teach children there are no absolute standards, even those opposed to the Committee probably gained at least a brief insight into the motives and concerns of those who support its efforts.

It is not always appropriate, of course, to write personally in letters to the editor; sometimes, as we have seen, writers may more usefully emphasize facts, clarify information, or present resources for readers who wish to learn more about certain issues. Even in these instances, however, it is almost always more effective to be specific and concrete, especially when writing on local issues. In her guest editorial, for instance, Susan Simonson cited declining national SAT scores as important evidence that the Corvallis public schools needed to change their curriculum. Much of the power of her argument was lost, however, when Zel Brook pointed out in her responding editorial that "Corvallis students' SAT scores are 49 points above the national average in the verbal test and 54 points above in mathematics" ("As I See It," December 27, 1982). Another problem with relying on abstractions and generalizations, as I noted earlier, is the almost inevitable tendency,

particularly in letters to the editor, to slip into fallacious reasoning.

As you have probably realized by now, despite their brevity, effective letters to the editor and guest editorials are as difficult to write--and, in some cases, perhaps even more difficult--than longer, ostensibly more complex, forms of prose. If I have learned one thing from my reading of the letters and guest editorials generated by the controversy over the Committee for Quality School Textbooks in Corvallis, however, it is that the hard work is worth it. Letters to the editor and guest editorials fulfill several vital functions. Most concretely, they serve an important political purpose, for although few individual letters have an immediate or decisive effect on either the community or such groups as the city council or school board, cumulatively they play an important role in influencing public opinion--and thus in determining who wins elections, what bond issues pass, and what is taught in our schools. Letters to the editor also serve a somewhat more abstract, but equally, important purpose: they help members of a community keep in touch not just with others, but with themselves as well.

Surely they deserve our best efforts?

Notes

[1] I have chosen to use abbreviations instead of full names and to delete letter writers' addresses. (There are two exceptions: Susan Simonson, chairman of the Committee for Quality School Textbooks, and Zel Brook, member of the Corvallis School Board and author of one of the two guest editorials on the subject. Because of their public role both needed, I felt, to be identified.) Those interested in this information may consult relevant issues of the Corvallis Gazette-Times, which prints this information in full. Unless otherwise indicated, all letters and guest editorials appeared on page four of the Gazette-Times.

[2] According to Professor Michael Beachley, Department of Speech Communication, Oregon State University, the Committee for Quality School Textbooks' proposed "Textbook and Curriculum Standards Act" closely resembles a similar document published by the American Legislative Exchange Council. Professor Beachley discusses the controversy surrounding the Committee for Quality School Textbooks in a case-study in his text, A Discipline of Persuasion (New York: Scott, Foresman, September, 1984).

[3] The Committee for Quality School Textbooks finally did provide the names of some of its members to the School Board. It has also in certain instances acceded to the request that it more closely adhere to Board procedures. (Source: phone conversation with Dr. Shirley Woods, Assistant Superintendent, Corvallis School District, September 14, 1983 and with Ms. Zel Brook, member of the 1982-83 School Board and this year's (1983-84) chairperson.

[4] Vincent Barry. Good Reasons for Writing: A Text with Readings. Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 1983, p. 258.

[5] In a later letter, this writer partially retracted, or at least attempted to clarify, her assertion about the local election committee.

[6] The main exception to this, of course, was the practice of presenting brief quotations from potentially controversial textbooks or novels.